

**Love and Live
Luke 10:25-37
Monmouth College
John Buchanan
May 17, 2014**

There is something wonderfully timeless and profoundly important about Baccalaureate and Commencement weekend on a college campus, and I am grateful to be part of it.

And thank you for inviting me to Monmouth College, one of the many fine institutions of higher education started by Presbyterians. Ever since the 16th century Presbyterians have put a premium on education, believing that a good religion is a matter of both heart and mind.

I'm glad to be here with Teri Ott, your outstanding College Chaplain. Teri's parents were active members and leaders in the congregation I served in Chicago, The Fourth Presbyterian Church. They always kept me informed of their daughter's progress and I know FPC is very proud of Teri and the good work she is doing.

I am particularly honored to be here for the final Baccalaureate and Commencement for your distinguished President Mauri Ditzler. Dr. Ditzler represents the highest and best of the tradition of Liberal Arts Education. He has led this college faithfully and creatively and I add my voice to many, many others wishing him Godspeed and all the best in

the next exciting chapter in his life and academic career.

I've attended five of these events as a parent, two more as a grandparent. If I stretch my imagination a bit, I vaguely recall sitting , a long time ago, where you are sitting this morning, in a kind of suspended animation, a little bleary-eyed from the over exertion of last night's party. I recall a mixture of relief that I actually made it and just a twinge of anxiety at what was now ahead. And, I confess a bit of boredom. Someone did a study to see what graduates retained and remembered about their graduation ten years afterward. Baccalaureate sermons and Commencement speeches were pretty low on the list.

In an old Doonesbury comic strip about college commencement, three robed graduates are slouched in their folding chairs, staring blankly ahead, in a kind of trance. One is reading a magazine. Another is listening to music. The third looks up to the podium and asks out loud, "Who's the old guy?" The first grad puts his magazine down and responds, "I think that's the President." "President of what?" the questioner asks. I tell that story knowing full well that it does not apply to this college and certainly not to this President.

I never tire of attending graduations but we do subject ourselves to a lot of rhetoric: sermons, speeches, admonitions, inspiring challenges and lots and lots of advice. We do it because everyone knows it is one of life's most important, defining moments.

You have a lot invested in getting here, not the least financially. So do your families. Parents, I know from

experience, love graduation. They may become a little tearful. They can't help but be nostalgic, remembering the day you were born, your first unassisted step, your first day of school. They think it was just yesterday when they dropped you off to begin your freshman year. They are, I know, also very proud. And some of them are thinking "Monday, we are going to be rich." And so, whatever else you do this weekend, make sure you thank them for all they have done to bring you to this day.

Monmouth College is deeply invested in you. Your education cost a lot more than you and your parents paid for. So, the Administration hopes you have paid your bills and will become a contributor, an altogether good and necessary thing to do—to keep this enterprise vital and strong, perhaps for your own children some day. The first check you write as a college graduate, however modest, ought to be to your college.

The faculty will remember you and follow you and watch attentively as your future unfolds. They hope you will remember their names, which I know you will. Truth be told, Faculty love this weekend. They are not exactly glad to see you go, but they do like summer.

The question of the day, of course, is "What now?" A question poet Mary Oliver asks in her elegant poem, "The Summer Day." It is a cardinal rule of public speaking not to quote poems in their entirety. But, this is a good one and my favorite. So, here it is, "The Summer Day."

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up
and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and
complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly
washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the
fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The question of the day is "What now?" How will you
live your one and only precious life? In these uncertain
and sometimes frightening times, how will you live
your life fully? How will you remain alive? How will you
be happy?

New York Times political analyst and journalist David
Brooks observed in a column a month ago: "We live in
a culture awash in talk about happiness. In one three-
month period last year, more than 1,000 books were
released on Amazon on the topic "of happiness)."

There are so many happiness resources available that it is known as “The Happiness Industry.” Some are helpful. Some, a lot actually are not, trivial. For instance – “Happiness is knowing what you want and getting it. It is a matter of willing and believing.” “Name it – claim it,” a popular televangelist says. Some of it is blatantly phony and exploitive: “Send in your money, buy the book, attend the retreat, take these pills. And some of it is academically serious, based on sociological and psychological research.

It’s big business, happiness is, and it is big because everybody wants it. Everybody wants to be happy. We want to know what to do and how to live in a way that makes us happy.

It is also a very old topic. One day, a long time ago, a man asked a teacher, a young Jewish rabbi, with a growing reputation, about it. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The common definition of “eternal life” is something that happens after you die. But it is broader, bigger than that. It has more to do with life in the here and now. I like to translate it - “What must I do to be fully, truly alive now?”

“What does our law, our moral code say?” Jesus asked. The man knew the answer: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said, “That’s it. That’s right. Do that and you will live.”

Now, the man was a lawyer and lawyers ask a lot of questions. So that's what he does, asks "Just who exactly is my neighbor?"

What comes next is one of the best short stories in the history of short stories, certainly one of the most beloved. Scholars point out that the point of this story lies close to the heart of the world's great religions. It is also the foundation of a system of ethics as well as a way to live your life.

Many of you know this story. We heard it read this afternoon. A man is walking down a notoriously dangerous road. Sure enough, he's mugged, his money is stolen, he is beaten and left for dead. Two men walk by, see him, and keep on walking. That part of the story always makes me cringe because they both were religious officials and had more important religious duties than stopping to help.

A third man approaches, a Samaritan, a member of a despised minority. He stops, patches up the man's wounds, lifts him onto the back of his donkey, takes him to a guest house, arranges for his care, promises to return and pay the bill.

"Which of these," Jesus asks, "was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" "That's easy," the lawyer responds. The one who showed him compassion, kindness, the one who allowed the man's condition to touch his heart, the one who stopped what he was doing and knelt by the roadside and did something to help. The one who loved. "Do this," Jesus said, "and you will live. Do this and you will be alive."

Do this and you will become the person you were created to be. Do this and you will become truly you.

The late William Sloane Coffin, long-time Chaplain of Yale, civil rights and peace advocate, put it this way: "Descartes was wrong — 'Cogito ergo sum' — 'I think therefore I am.' Nonsense," Coffin said. "It's 'Amo ergo sum' — 'I love therefore I am.'"

So simple: so radical: so utterly contrary to what our consumer culture tells us, bombards us thousands of times, in slick magazine and newspaper ads, television commercial after commercial. "Drive this car, wear this jewelry, drink this scotch, live at this address, take this vacation — you will be the envy of everyone you know: you will be happy." When you buy into the relentless message of consumer culture — I'm tempted to call it a religion, because that is what it really is — when you buy in, the requirement, the absolutely necessary requirement — related directly to the god of happiness — is to make as much money as you possibly can.

The problem is that it isn't true. It doesn't work. It's a lie. Getting everything you want, having enough money to buy everything you want, will not make you happy. Being poor, by the way, won't make you happy either. Author Ann Lamott quips, "I've been rich and I've been poor. Rich is better." But it will not, does not, produce happiness.

One of those wonderful New Yorker cartoons (3/31/14) showed an elegantly dressed man, fashionable suit, white shirt and tie, striding purposefully down the hallway of an office building, briefcase in one hand,

cell phone in the other. He's talking and he says, "I'm working harder than I ever have, but all I get out of it is larger and larger paychecks."

He's discovering that the promise is not true. Money is not bad, not at all. But it will not make you happy. I hope it is not too late for him.

There is an alternative. It's right there in that simple 2,000-year-old story. In the midst of all the advice that will shower down on you this weekend, it is what I want to put in front of you. Find something to love, something to give your life to. Find someone to love more than you love your own life, something beyond your own amusement that summons your passion, calls out of you your heart, your love.

Henry Betts is one of the most fascinating people I have ever met: a physician who early in his career noticed how difficult life is for people with physical disabilities. Not only was it difficult to treat them medically, but no one was even trying to address the disability itself, whatever it was. Life for the disabled was miserable, one barrier after another in the process of moving from one place to another, negotiating doorways and aisles and restaurants and bathrooms. It was confining and humiliating and debilitating. So Henry Betts went to work, not only devising new, ground-breaking techniques for the process of rehabilitation, but threw himself into the social and political arena, advocating, arguing, lobbying for better, kinder, more compassionate public policy. Curb cuts, for instance, so simple, but so absolutely necessary if you are in a wheelchair. Dr. Betts founded the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, the leading

rehabilitation facility in the nation and he inspired and helped write the “Americans with Disabilities Act” which literally moved mountains and made life better for millions of Americans.

It is my honor to know him. Over a pleasant lunch he told me a story I have never forgotten. It happened while Dr. Betts was the Director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. A teenaged boy, a quadriplegic, in a room by himself became withdrawn, terribly depressed, stopped communicating with anyone, refused to interact with the staff, wouldn’t get out of bed for therapy, assumed a fetal position facing the wall and went into what Dr. Betts called “total withdrawal from life.” He apparently had decided that there was nothing to live for, no reason to go on living. The staff of the Institute was afraid he would die.

And then, because there was no available appropriate space, the staff put a severely burned three-year-old boy in the room with him. The teenager turned his back and ignored the little boy at first. Then, slowly, he began to notice him and watch him and listen to what the doctors and nurses and physical therapists were saying about him. And then a miracle happened. The depressed teenager began to care about his little roommate. Before long, he was pressing the call button, telling nurses to bring pain medicine, nagging the staff: “maybe he needs a drink of water, more food, he’s not eating enough.” And then he started to report to the doctors and nurses what he observed and began to advise them as to the little boy’s treatment and therapy. He became animated: “why don’t you try this?....that?”

The teenager, literally, came back to life when he opened his heart and started to care about another human being.

And that is what I pray for you this morning—health and success, of course, but far more important, I pray that you care deeply, that you will find someone to love more than you love your own life, that you will find some cause beyond your own comfort, that calls out of you—your energy, your imagination, your intelligence and creativity—which is to say, your love.

Congratulations, Members of the Class of 2014. God bless you, today and tomorrow and all the days ahead.